NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY

MANDELA UNIVERSITY
AFRICA HUB

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Learning from **Leading Economies**

Entrepreneurship runs the world. Almost everything in society has been designed and developed by entrepreneurs. From this standpoint we need to stop thinking about entrepreneurship as a separate skill, and rather view it as an essential skill for innovative thinking, behaviour, curiosity, creativity and opportunity.

At the Mandela University Africa Hub (MUAH) we are committed to launching a generational movement of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) owned by young people. From 2025 to 2026, our MUAH team trained 2 556 students and young township entrepreneurs in the metro, and helped to develop 55 MSMEs, growing their turnover by more than 5%.

Irrespective of their field of study, there should be compulsory entrepreneurial training for all students to develop their creativity, business acumen and innovation. We also need to dispense with the siloed way of looking at careers and professions. If we look at lawyers, for example, many go into businesses that have nothing to do with law.

All students also need to develop the so-called 'soft skills', which are now essential in every profession, including communication, problem-solving, collaboration, adaptability, critical thinking, creative thinking and human relations.

World Digital Education Conference

To advance entrepreneurship at our University and in our country, we believe in learning from leading economies worldwide, which is what a group of us from Mandela University achieved on a visit to China from 3-14 May this year for the World Digital Education Conference in Hangzhou City.

China today is the second largest economy in the world and a global knowledge leader, mainly driven by rapid technological development, including AI, the internet of things, big data and data science. Technology and digitalisation today are not only enablers of development; they are differentiators in inclusive and sustainable development, and South Africa has to get on board.

One of three universities we visited was Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, which was an eye-opener. It has a three-storey innovation lab for students across disciplines. They have all the AI, robotics, animation and 3D printing facilities at their disposal, and the lab is full of students inventing – from next generation drones to robotic fruit harvesters to animation for learning.

Following the World Digital Education Conference, Mandela University has signed a letter of intent with the Open University of China and China University of Petroleum to establish a learning centre at MUAH to further strengthen digital education – hopefully launching early next year.

Advancing digital skills

As part of our digital education drive, the three-year Samsung Innovation Campus,Campus, launched on 1 April this year, is progressing well, with 27 postgraduate students advancing their coding, programming and AI skills. By the end of the three-year partnership with Samsung, we should have 90 graduates equipped to create their own businesses and be absorbed by industry.

Another exciting development at the University is the appointment of economist and researcher Professor Thobeka Ncanywa from 1 June this year as the new FALF-FREF Chair in Entrepreneurship and Financial Inclusion. She is focused on creative, innovative research, drawing on international training such as the Germany-supported Student Training in Entrepreneurship Programme (STEP).

With international best practice as our goal, we are working hard in a range of ways to establish entrepreneurship and business incubation as a core function of learning at Mandela University, with MUAH as the overarching entrepreneurial nerve centre.

As an institution, we want to co-shape a generation of self-reliant, future-focused, inventive graduates who will drive the knowledge economy and deepen transformative development in South Africa.

Please share your thoughts, ideas and entrepreneurial insights with us by emailing our public relations officer, Zimasa Mbovane at Zimasa.Mbovane@mandela.ac.za

Yours in entrepreneurship

Prof Thobekani Lose
Director: Mandela University Africa Hub (MUAH)

Hangzhou, China

A Culture of **Excellence**

Zimasa Mbovane

Balancing careers with academic study is no small feat – and four Mandela University Africa Hub (MUAH) staff members did just that, earning new qualifications during the April graduation season.

Fidel Mabolabola

Kamva Magobiane

The group's hard work reflected the Hub's culture of professional development and academic advancement, says MUAH director Prof Thobekani Lose.

Milestone moments

On 10 April, public relations interns Kamva Magobiane graduated with a Diploma in Public Relations Management, while Zimasa Mbovane obtained an Advanced Diploma in Public Relations Management Cum Laude. Mbovane currently also serves as Public Relations Officer for MUAH and Coordinator of the Business Incubation Web Association (BIWA).

Further celebrations followed as Katekani Mabunda, Student Entrepreneurship Coordinator, graduated on 13 April with a Diploma in Economics, and Fidel Mabolabola, Project Coordinator, on 20 April with a Diploma in Management.

Learning beyond the workplace

The Hub fosters an environment that encourages innovation, academic advancement and professional growth, says Prof Lose. "I always encourage colleagues to continue studying until they attain their PhDs. Whenever an opportunity to further your studies presents itself, take it." The graduates' accomplishments serve as an inspiration to both students and fellow staff members, demonstrating that academic achievement and professional excellence can go hand in hand, he says.

"Their success stories reinforce the Hub's vision of building a community that values innovation, entrepreneurship, leadership and education in equal measure."

Katekani Mabunda

Record Number of **Graduates**

Interest in the Mandela University Africa Hub's Accelerator Programme continues to soar, with 46 entrepreneurs graduating on 30 May, the largest cohort to date. Applications for the 2027 intake open in September.

Launched in September 2025, the programme, capped at 50 clients per group, has now produced 85 graduates across two cohorts. The latest crop of entrepreneurs completed six weeks of Saturday training designed to strengthen business skills, confidence and entrepreneurial readiness.

Turning ambition into action

What began as a simple application process has become a life-changing opportunity for dozens of aspiring entrepreneurs across Gqeberha.

Participants complete practical, interactive sessions covering Design Thinking, the Business Model Canvas, Financial Management, Business Management and Compliance Requirements, equipping them with the tools needed to build sustainable businesses.

The programme forms part of the Hub's commitment to fostering entrepreneurship among both Nelson Mandela University students and members of the broader community.

By extending support beyond the campus into local communities and townships, the initiative continues to create opportunities for economic participation and innovation.

"We are putting so much effort into equipping each cohort to grow confidently in their business ventures, ensuring that they also participate in pitching competitions," says Dr Chuene Semono, Project Specialist at the Hub.

Real impact, real stories

The programme's value was evident at the graduation ceremony, where participants reflected on their entrepreneurial journeys and the difference the programme had made in their lives.

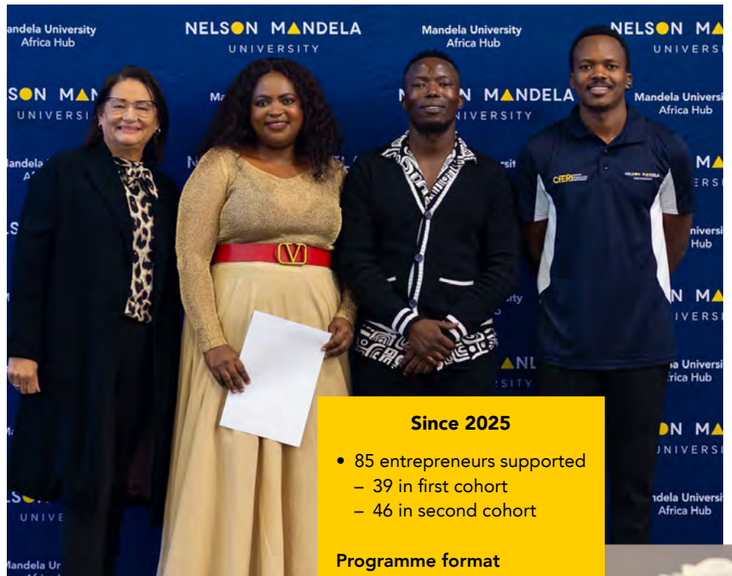
One graduate shared: "What may seem like just another call for applications to the University is much more than that to us. When I saw the opportunity, I knew it had the potential to change my life."

Since completing the programme, her business has grown significantly, earning her invitations to exhibit and present her products and services at events across the Eastern Cape.

Meeting a growing demand

Due to the high volume of applications for the Accelerator Programme, programme facilitators elected to divide participants into two cohorts for 2026 rather than opening a new application round. The approach ensures that each entrepreneur receives the mentorship, guidance and support needed to maximise their potential.

As the next cohort starts in July, the Mandela University Africa Hub is focused on strengthening entrepreneurial capacity and supporting business growth across the region.



Since 2025

- 85 entrepreneurs supported
  - 39 in first cohort
  - 46 in second cohort

Programme format

- 6 sessions over 3 months (2 per month)

Key learning areas

- Design Thinking
- Business Model Canvas
- Financial Management
- Business Management
- Compliance Requirements

Sandakahle Sivungu, left, with Batho Pele team members Philasande Kubheka, Khanya Soji, Akhona Gamana and Yamkela Komani

Recognition for Homegrown Innovation

A student entrepreneur who turned a concern about waste in local communities into an award-winning green enterprise is taking Nelson Mandela University's innovation story to the continental stage.

The numbers

- One of eight projects selected across Africa
- One of four South African winners
- Up to £20 000 awarded per project
- Focus on green, social and digital innovation

When Sandakahle Sivungu received an email informing him that Batho Pele BioLoop Africa Farm had been selected for the British Council Innovation for African Universities (IAU) Enterprise and Innovation Challenge, he could hardly believe it.

"Firstly, when that email came in, it was a shock for us," he recalls. "We were like, is this email even legit?"

The answer was yes.

Batho Pele BioLoop Africa Farm, a youth-led venture founded by Sivungu and his team, was chosen as one of eight winning projects from across Africa and one of four from South Africa – two of them from Mandela University.

The British Council programme supports university-linked enterprises tackling social, digital and green development challenges while strengthening entrepreneurship ecosystems across Sub-Saharan Africa.

A solution rooted in community

For Sivungu, the recognition validated years of experimentation inspired by a simple question: how could communities turn waste into something useful?

Growing up in the rural town of Mqanduli, near Mthatha in the Eastern Cape, and later in Rustenburg in the North West Province, he regularly saw waste accumulating in public spaces. Determined to find a solution, he began researching ways to convert food and plastic waste into resources that could support sustainable agriculture.

He teamed up with Philasande Kubheka, Khanya Soji, Akhona Gamana and Yamkela Komani and, today, the project is developing a smart farming system that combines circular economy principles, organic fertiliser production and technology-enabled agriculture.

Creating impact

The British Council funding is helping the team acquire specialised equipment, automation systems and plant-monitoring technology while creating new employment opportunities.

"We want to impact in terms of creating jobs, having more youth involved and training local farmers," says Sivungu. "Our aim is to implement this solution in schools and communities so they can produce their own vegetables."

For Nelson Mandela University, the achievement highlights the growing impact of student entrepreneurship and innovation with real-world social and environmental benefits.

Connecting Research to the Economy

Economist and researcher Prof Thobeka Ncanywa joined Nelson Mandela University on 1 June 2026 as the new FALF-FREF Chair in Entrepreneurship and Financial Inclusion. She has a radical question for every department on campus: what does your research actually do for the economy? *Gillian McAinsh* reports.

Prof Thobeka Ncanywa

South Africa ships its minerals overseas as raw ore, lets its depleted mines stand idle and wonders why unemployment refuses to move.

For Prof Ncanywa, this is precisely the kind of problem universities should be solving, and largely are not.

She arrived at Mandela University with 33 years of teaching and research behind her and a newly developed theory on how universities can align knowledge production with economic survival. She also brings a clear-eyed view of how much ground there is to cover.

The University's 19th research chair, based at the Second Avenue campus in Summerstrand, was left vacant by the sudden death of Prof Keo Motaung in November 2025, only months after she took up the position.

Prof Ncanywa knew her predecessor well as they had worked side by side in the Entrepreneurship Development in Higher Education (EDHE) community of practice at Universities South Africa (USAf) since its early days in 2019. They also were fellow members of the Female International REsearch (FIRE) network linking distinguished academics across Africa and Germany.

"Prof Keo was a star in entrepreneurship development," Prof Ncanywa says. "We shared the same principles of entrepreneurship and design thinking."

Rethinking what research is for

Prof Ncanywa's path to this position started in a school classroom. She began as a maths and science teacher, moved through school leadership, then entered higher education at the University of Fort Hare, where she completed her PhD in Economics.

Five years each at Fort Hare, the University of Limpopo and Walter Sisulu University followed, with her most recent role as Director of Research and Innovation at Walter Sisulu. Her maths grounding opened specialist doors within economics (mathematical economics, econometrics and financial markets) and now informs a research philosophy that is resolutely anti-abstract.

She is careful to distinguish what the chair does from what MUAH's incubators and hubs do. The latter teach practical business skills to students and community entrepreneurs; her mandate is different.

"Research is knowledge production," she says. "In research, you find out how something happened, what you used to do it, how it can be sustainable. As much as we teach the skills of entrepreneurship, we must focus on creative, innovative research."

Aligning knowledge with financial survival

This line of thinking led her to develop what she calls Entrepreneurship Alignment Theory, a framework for tracing how a university's academic programmes can be deliberately connected to third-stream income: the contract research, executive short courses, licensing agreements and consulting revenues that sit alongside tuition fees and government subsidies as pillars of institutional sustainability.

Her data, drawn from South African universities, shows that very few are successfully making this conversion despite widespread talk of becoming entrepreneurial.

"It's about showing how we align what the University produces as knowledge to bring financial stability," she says. "That is key to my contribution."

Linking industry with academia

She draws a pointed contrast with European practice. In many European institutions, industry partners co-design the curriculum; companies become co-lecturers, and graduates move into roles that were, in effect, shaped around them.

"In Africa, we take students to industry. We don't take industry to the university," she says. "In Europe, they call industry, they design the programmes with industry, and then the students know where they are going to work."

The bamboo argument

The concept of "economic complexity" sits at the heart of Prof Ncanywa's thinking. The argument is straightforward: a country's prosperity depends not just on what it produces, but on how sophisticated and value-added those products are. South Africa, she argues, consistently undersells itself by exporting raw materials rather than transformed goods.

"Economic complexity says don't trade them as raw products, trade them as complex, value-added products."

A concrete example: depleted mines, long written off as liabilities, could be converted to agricultural use. Minerals leaching into the surrounding soil make trees there unusually strong; strong enough, she notes, to rival bamboo, which China has turned into an entire manufacturing base.

The scientists, engineers, economists and agricultural researchers all have a role.

MAKING MATHS MATTER

Nhusta is reimagining Mathematics education through gamified and culturally relevant learning experiences, helping learners build confidence and improve outcomes while changing the way they engage with the subject. ***By Zimasa Mbovane***

For many learners, Mathematics remains one of the most challenging subjects in the classroom. Recognising this, entrepreneur and innovator Ezethu Sivuku founded Nhusta to make learning Mathematics more accessible, engaging and meaningful."Nhusta is an educational technology (EdTech) business that uses gamified, visually engaging and culturally relevant learning experiences to help learners better understand mathematical concepts," says Sivuku.

"Through games, digital learning tools and creative content, the platform makes Mathematics feel practical, relatable and enjoyable."

Recognition through innovation

Nhusta's commitment to transforming Mathematics education has earned recognition across a range of innovation and entrepreneurship platforms.

- Injini with Mastercard Foundation – Top 16
- ABSA Innovation Challenge – Top 10
- MTN Digital Innovation Challenge – Top 15
- Thailand Green Tech Camp Pitch – Top 2
- Participation in SA Innovation Week Exhibition
- Participation in the PropellHer ICT Programme
- Participation in the Motsepe Foundation Golden Circle Programme

The idea emerged from Sivuku's observations of the growing number of learners who struggle with Mathematics or move away from pure Mathematics because they find it difficult, abstract or disconnected from everyday life.

Determined to address this challenge, she developed a learning model that bridges the gap between academic content and real-world experiences.

Building momentum through support

Like many early-stage businesses, Nhusta has faced challenges along its entrepreneurial journey, particularly in securing funding to support product development, research, testing, marketing and day-to-day operations.

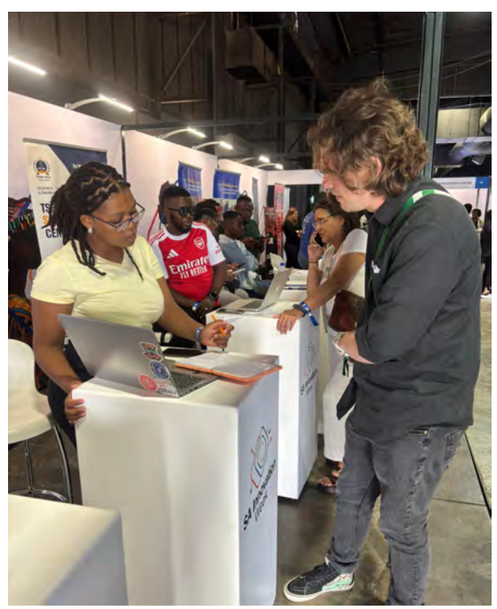
To overcome these obstacles, Sivuku pursued opportunities that could provide mentorship, resources, networks and growth.

She first discovered the Mandela University Africa Hub through a school memo and later joined through the SEED Programme. Since then, the Hub has helped strengthen the business model, develop entrepreneurial skills and unlock valuable opportunities.

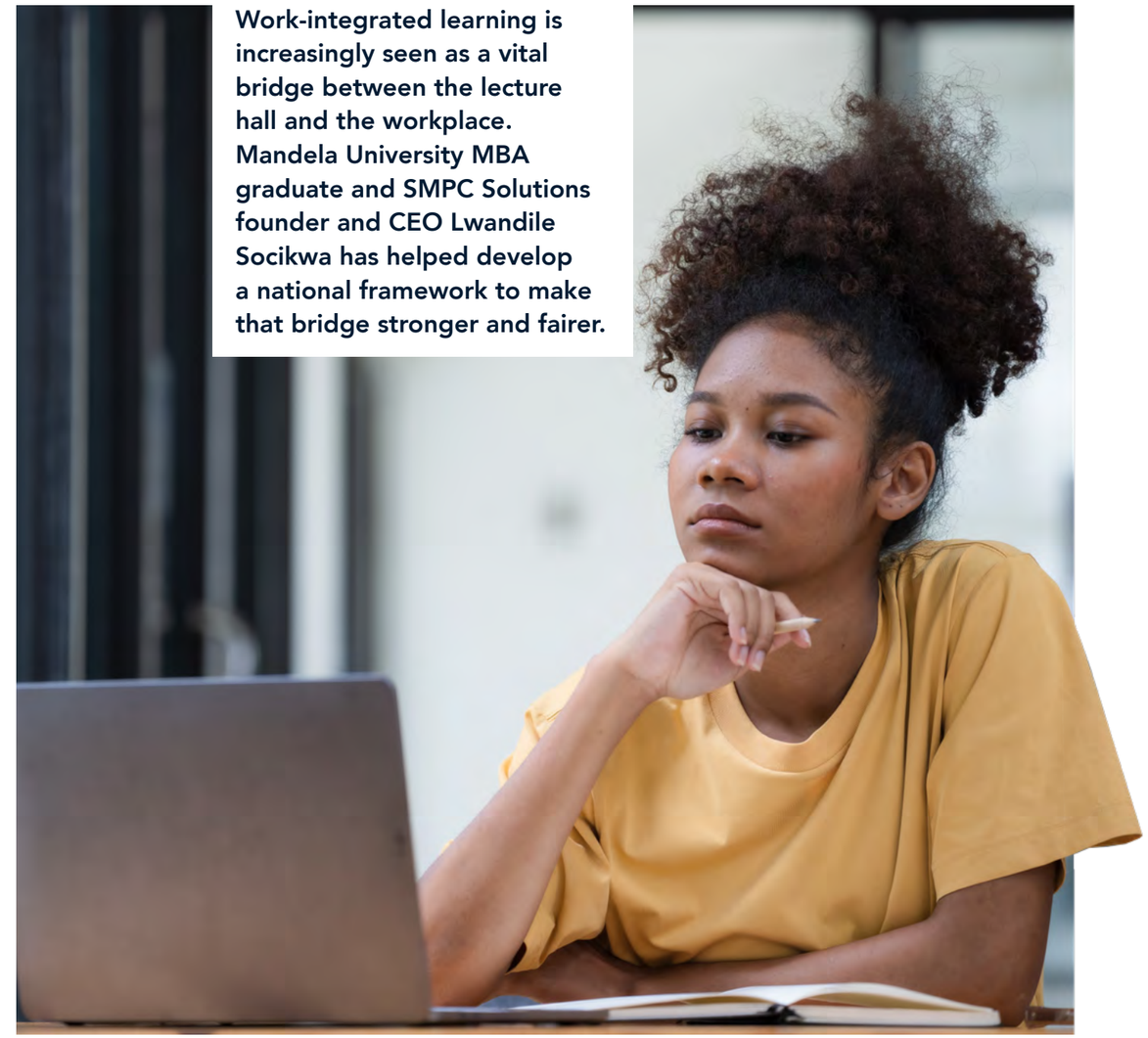
Nhusta has subsequently participated in several prestigious programmes, exhibitions and competitions, increasing its visibility within the innovation and education sectors.

These opportunities enabled the business to test its concept, receive valuable feedback, build credibility and connect with stakeholders who share a passion for education, technology and youth-led innovation.

Today, Nhusta is on a mission to transform Mathematics education, and show how innovation and entrepreneurship can be used to solve real-world challenges and create meaningful impact for future generations.



Building bridges to work



Work-integrated learning is increasingly seen as a vital bridge between the lecture hall and the workplace. Mandela University MBA graduate and SMPC Solutions founder and CEO Lwandile Socikwa has helped develop a national framework to make that bridge stronger and fairer.

Socikwa has helped develop a unified national framework for work-integrated learning, aimed at strengthening the link between higher education and the labour market.

The framework matters because too many graduates still struggle to turn their qualifications into jobs. By anchoring work-integrated learning as a recognised professional practice, it replaces a patchwork of approaches with shared standards for designing, delivering, assessing and quality-assuring student placements across the post-school sector.

Socikwa supported the Mandela University Africa Hub in its work with Entrepreneurship Development in Higher Education (EDHE) for Universities South Africa (USAf) to shape the policy.

"Higher education has been trying to establish a standard policy framework that guides and directs work-integrated learning within the sector," he says. "There used to be a lot of fragmentation."

He says work-integrated learning does more than fill a line on a CV: "It's about improving the employability of graduates, because it combines theoretical learning with on-the-job experience."

It also helps students build professional networks and arrive at work better prepared.

Striking the right balance

Socikwa, whose own first taste of work came through six months of in-service training as an undergraduate in the mid-2000s, cautions against concentrating placements too heavily in the public sector.

In technical fields especially, he warns, this can narrow what students are exposed to.

"You will get very limited exposure if you are stuck in a government department as an engineering graduate who needs experience, where you go and just read meters, whereas you should be the guy going there to fix the meters."

The answer, he believes, is a healthy balance between public and private placements.

Beyond internships

While many people picture internships and placements, Socikwa says experiential learning takes many forms.

Incubators, mentorship programmes, accelerators and entrepreneurship initiatives all let students test ideas and solve real problems – work that sits at the heart of the Hub's enterprise development mission.

He sees room for small businesses and startups to play a far bigger role. "Startups are evolving on a daily basis and can be a very good training ground for students," he says, pointing in particular to postgraduates pursuing research.

Stronger collaboration between universities, small enterprises and funding agencies such as the SETAs, he argues, could unlock many more opportunities.

The framework also aims to widen access for students who are too often left out, including those living with disabilities and from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Lwandile Socikwa

Having completed its technical phase, the framework is now moving through ministerial and cabinet approval.

For Mandela University students, the aim is straightforward: to ensure learning does not stop at the lecture-room door, but continues through experiences that prepare them to contribute, innovate and thrive.

How young entrepreneurs are building Africa's future

Fuelling MSME business growth

MUAH's Enterprise Development Fund fuels Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) business growth, helping student, community and township entrepreneurs scale their businesses and create jobs through grant funding. "Incubated businesses need capital to grow," says Prof Thobekani Lose. "The funding is intended to help take businesses to the next level, and incubatees provide the Centre for Entrepreneurship Rapid Incubator with financial statements to show how the money has been invested."

Transforming

Township Healthcare

After losing her mother when she could not find a pharmacy or clinic open on a Sunday in the township, Nosiphiwo Mqoqi opened her own pharmacy in KwaZakhele. Today, it offers a much-needed service to residents of KwaZakhele while creating jobs and supporting community initiatives.

As the founder and owner of Phiwo Health Pharmacy, Mqoqi has built more than a business. She has created a healthcare lifeline for residents of KwaZakhele in Gqeberha, where she was born.

Located in the Daku Shoprite Shopping Centre in Emagaleni, the pharmacy opened its doors in 2021 after years of planning, and is 100% owned by Mqoqi, who says: "Becoming an entrepreneur is a very tough journey, but it is the best decision I have ever made."

A graduate of Nelson Mandela University, with a National Diploma in Industrial and Operations Management and a BTech in Operations Management, she spent 12 years working for Aspen Pharmacare. During that time, she rose to leadership positions, gaining valuable insight into the pharmaceutical industry.

When purpose became personal

"While at Aspen I decided I would like to have my own pharmacy," Mqoqi explains.

That ambition took on new urgency when her mother fell ill on a Sunday afternoon in 2020. Unable to find an open pharmacy or clinic in Motherwell, where the family had moved when she was young, they rushed to hospital.

"I lost my mother on the way to hospital."

The experience exposed a painful reality: many township residents face significant barriers when seeking urgent medical help after hours.

"That was when I decided to open my own pharmacy in KwaZakhele," she says.

Like many entrepreneurs, Mqoqi faced financial pressures, uncertainty and the responsibility of supporting employees.

To strengthen her business skills, she completed a certificate in Advanced Management and Leadership through the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). Her entrepreneurial journey gained further momentum in 2024 when she joined the Centre for Entrepreneurship Rapid Incubator (CfERI) at MUAH.

People depend on this business

Phiwo Health Pharmacy is thriving. Long hours and weekend shifts are part of the reality, and Mqoqi's cellphone number is displayed on the door for 24-hour emergencies.

She employs 11 people, most of them from KwaZakhele and Motherwell. Several are breadwinners for their families – a responsibility that motivates Mqoqi during difficult times.

Moving to the next level

Through the incubation programme, Mqoqi gained access to mentorship, strategic planning tools and the internationally recognised GrowthWheel business development framework.

"I learnt that you need an ongoing growth plan to take your business to the next level," she says. "They also emphasised the importance of building a business that can run even when I am not there, by employing people I can trust."

She also strengthened the pharmacy's marketing by joining the Alpha Pharm franchise, a recognised brand.

In December 2025, Mqoqi received funding through MUAH's Enterprise Development Fund, which she used to purchase equipment for the pharmacy's clinic, including a patient bed, wheelchair, laptop for the sister who runs the clinic, and a portable air-conditioning unit.

"I think about the people who depend on this business, including my family. That keeps me going."

She remains deeply committed to community development. The pharmacy sponsors local school sporting events, participates in health promotion campaigns with the Department of Health, and hosts soup kitchen initiatives for elderly residents on social grant days.

Looking ahead, Mqoqi hopes to expand Phiwo Health Pharmacy to other townships in Gqeberha.

"I am a believer and my name means 'gift' in isiXhosa. I believe I am a gift to my community," she says.

"I treat what I do as my calling."

Enabling Student Access

Founded by Mandela University student Dzunani Zitha, NOVICESPHERE is helping young people navigate the often confusing journey into accessing higher education.

For many young people, navigating university applications, bursaries and accommodation can be overwhelming, particularly in communities where access to information and support is limited.

For Mandela University second-year BCom Computer Science and Information Systems student Zitha, that challenge presented an opportunity to create a business while making a difference.

"No learner should miss out on educational opportunities because they do not know where to start," he says. "My goal is to address this gap."

As founder and chief executive officer of NOVICESPHERE, which he established in 2021, Zitha describes the business as a student ecosystem company operating in tertiary access, student accommodation and educational infrastructure.

"We assist with university applications aligned with what learners qualify for, as well as bursary submissions, registration support, accommodation placement and student housing management," he explains.

Building a national network

Originally from Mpumalanga, Zitha has developed partnerships with more than 100 schools in his home province, most of them in rural communities, working with the Department of Basic Education there.

Balancing his studies with the demands of a growing business is not always easy.

"It requires careful time management and priority alignment," he says. "I want the company to be well established by the time I graduate."

To date, more than 1 000 students have used NOVICESPHERE's services.

"We have a university registration and accommodation placement success rate of approximately 95%," says Zitha. "We charge an affordable fee to assist students through the application, registration and accommodation placement process. Student accommodation is a major issue countrywide and I recognised this niche."

Growing with support

Growth accelerated when Zitha became a CfERI incubatee in 2025. Through mentorship, business advisory services and exposure to the GrowthWheel framework, he gained valuable insights into scaling the enterprise.

In late 2025, NOVICESPHERE received support through the MUAH Enterprise Development Fund. The grant enabled the company to invest in technology and equipment, strengthening its digital infrastructure.

Through CfERI, Zitha attended the Zungu Investment Masterclass, a youth and entrepreneurship empowerment initiative led by business leader Sandile Zungu.

Through the programme, he gained a mentor, Preshaan Ramsamy, who has helped strengthen NOVICESPHERE's property management offering.

He is also mentored by Professor Thobekani Lose and Tando Mhlobiso, founder and head of the construction industry Mhlobiso Group.

Student accommodation solutions

Recognising the growing demand for student accommodation, NOVICESPHERE constantly searches for suitable accommodation and has built partnerships that capacitate it to place students in more than 1 500 off-campus beds, mainly in Gqeberha.

Partner accommodation providers pay the company a percentage for beds filled.

"Every student accommodation property has cameras and security and is in close proximity to the University's shuttle stops," says Zitha.

If NOVICESPHERE manages a property, it charges between 3% and 10% per student on the rental amount.

Expanding the vision

To further grow the business, NOVICESPHERE also now offers TVET college application support and services, providing students with access to both university and TVET pathways.

"In May this year we also added student accommodation sales – properties that can be converted into student accommodation," he explains. "The paperwork is handled by conveyancers and we bring together clients wanting to buy and sell properties. We get a fee for initiating the relationship.

"Our current target is to build relationships with 300 schools across the Eastern Cape, while continuing to pursue additional school partnerships in other provinces.

"We are working on building relationships with educational institutions, property developers and industry stakeholders to achieve this," he says. "As Professor Lose says, businesses need capital to grow, and this very much includes partnerships and support."

Family Tradition to Sustainable Success

What began as an interest in thrift and sustainable business practices has evolved into a growing skincare and haircare brand. Founder Lunathi Fudu credits the Mandela University Africa Hub Accelerator Programme with helping her transform a passion project into a business with a clear vision, expanding customer base and growing profile, writes *Zimasa Mbovane*.

Just weeks after completing the programme in November 2025, the creative entrepreneur launched Graceful Earth – a South African plant-based skincare and haircare brand inspired by traditional knowledge, natural ingredients and conscious consumerism.

Today, the business is steadily building a customer base while promoting a sustainable approach to beauty and personal care.

Graceful Earth encourages consumers to reconnect with nature through handcrafted products made from carefully selected ingredients, while championing environmental responsibility.

Finding new direction

Fudu's entrepreneurial journey did not begin in the beauty industry.

Instead, it started with a strong interest in thrift and sustainable business practices. Joining the Accelerator Programme exposed her to new ideas around agro-processing and inspired a shift in business direction.

As her understanding of natural product development grew, so did her interest in organic skincare and haircare. The transition felt natural because she and her mother had spent years creating similar products together using traditional methods and plant-based ingredients.

"The process became more than creating skincare products. It became a way to learn, preserve traditional knowledge, and spend meaningful time with my mother."

Business Focus

- Plant-based skincare and haircare products
- Sustainable and environmentally conscious practices
- Official Launch
- December 2025

Key Markets and Exhibitions

- First Thursdays Market
- Thrift GQ
- Greenacres Market at The Bridge
- What's Good In The Hood Market

Future Focus

- Sustainable packaging solutions
- Strategic partnerships
- Skills development and empowerment initiatives

Lunathi Fudu

Growing through challenges

Like many growing businesses, Graceful Earth continues to navigate the challenges that come with expansion.

Key challenges include:

- Sourcing environmentally sustainable packaging at affordable prices
- Delays in accessing approved funding for equipment and raw materials
- Expanding operational capacity to meet growing demand
- Building partnerships that support long-term growth

Despite these challenges, the business remains focused on creating opportunities for collaboration, training and empowerment within the sustainable beauty sector.

Built on tradition

What began as a shared activity between mother and daughter soon evolved into a business opportunity.

"The process became more than creating skincare products. It became a way to learn, preserve traditional knowledge, and spend meaningful time with my mother," says Fudu.

Following the completion of the Accelerator Programme, she took just two weeks to establish the business.

Graceful Earth officially launched at the First Thursdays Market in December 2025, where customers embraced both the products and the brand's vision.

Building momentum

Since joining the Hub, Graceful Earth has participated in exhibitions, competitions and collaborative initiatives that have expanded its reach and strengthened its network.

The brand has showcased its products at First Thursdays at The Heritage Café, Thrift GQ, Greenacres Market at The Bridge, and the What's Good In The Hood Market at Fairview Grounds.

Additional milestones include participating in a marketing competition with Urban Wellness Lab, collaborating with Konvenient Magazine and MIST Candles in Johannesburg, presenting at the T3 Incubation Hub Workshop, being interviewed on Sauma HD Radio, and being featured on the Siyaphanda Podcast hosted by The Media Workshop.

Fudu describes the Accelerator Programme as a transformative milestone that arrived at exactly the right time.

"The programme equipped me with the knowledge and confidence to pivot my business model while providing tools that I use today," she says.

The programme provided practical entrepreneurial skills, mentorship and networking opportunities that influence the growth of the business. Relationships formed with fellow entrepreneurs have also led to collaborations, referrals and ongoing peer support.

As Graceful Earth continues to grow, its mission remains clear: to create products that honour traditional knowledge, promote conscious living and inspire consumers to reconnect with nature.

A Mandela University delegation travelled to China in May to join some of the world's leading voices in artificial intelligence, innovation and education at the 2026 World Digital Education Conference. The visit opened doors to new partnerships and fresh thinking around the future of learning. Professor Arielle Zhaoyi Liu, who coordinated the delegation, chatted to *Heather Dugmore*.

Global Lessons, Local Impact

When and where in China was the conference held?

The 2026 World Digital Education Conference (WDEC) was held from 11 to 13 May 2026 in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China. Hangzhou is a city of profound historical and cultural heritage, and is recognised globally as a leading hub of the digital economy and technological innovation. It is the birthplace of Alibaba Group – the Chinese global technology company specialising in e-commerce, retail, internet services and artificial intelligence.

Who hosted the conference, who attended and what was the goal?

The conference was co-hosted by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and the People's Government of Zhejiang Province under the theme "Artificial Intelligence + Education: Transformation, Development and Governance". As a global leader in digital education, China is committed to advancing international cooperation in this field.

Ministers of Education from across the globe, representatives of leading international organisations, distinguished university presidents and eminent scholars in artificial intelligence gathered to explore pathways for educational transformation in the age of AI.

Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training Buti Manamela led the South African delegation, with a central mission to translate the high degree of political trust between South Africa and China into measurable and actionable outcomes in education and skills development.

The conference sought to foster a new global educational ecosystem that is human-centred and characterised by harmonious human-machine collaboration. Its vision is to cultivate a new generation of lifelong learners who can harness artificial intelligence, lead future development and contribute to a trajectory that is equitable, inclusive and responsible.

Why did Nelson Mandela University attend?

At a time when artificial intelligence is reshaping the global economic and social landscape, digital education has emerged as a key driver of educational equity and human capital development. Nelson Mandela University recognises that, to remain at the forefront of this transformation, it must actively engage in international dialogue and learn from leading global practices.

The University's participation had three strategic objectives:

- **To engage with the global frontier of "AI + Education"** by gaining direct insight into the models and governance frameworks developed by China and other nations during their digital education transitions.
- **To pursue strategic partnerships on a high-profile international platform**, particularly with leading Chinese educational institutions, technology enterprises and government bodies, thereby introducing external resources and momentum into the University's digital development agenda.
- **To bring advanced digital education concepts and technologies into South Africa**, supporting socio-economic development and creating expanded opportunities for skills development, employment and entrepreneurship.

What was achieved?

Among the most significant outcomes of the visit was the signing of a Tripartite Letter of Intent between Nelson Mandela University and two of China's leading higher education institutions – the Open University of China and China University of Petroleum (East China).

Together, the three institutions initiated the establishment of the Open University of China South Africa (Gqeberha) Overseas Learning Centre.

The learning centre represents a concrete realisation of Chinese President Xi Jinping's initiative to establish overseas learning centres within BRICS nations and marks the beginning of substantive trilateral cooperation in the field of digital education.

The three parties will jointly advance projects in digital education, lifelong learning and talent development, with the aim of building the centre into a vital platform connecting educational resources between China and Africa, advancing South-South cooperation and strengthening people-to-people ties.

About Professor Arielle Zhaoyi Liu

Based in the Department of Research Support and Management, Prof Liu is also Executive Director, Sino–Africa Cooperation Think Tank and Director of the South Africa Branch, Institute of African Studies, Zhejiang Normal University.

> **"The conference sought to foster a new global educational ecosystem that is human-centred and characterised by harmonious human-machine collaboration."**

An innovation and **employability experience**

From entrepreneurship and innovation to interview preparation and professional branding, students at Nelson Mandela University's George Campus spent three days developing the skills needed to succeed in an increasingly competitive world of work.

The series of initiatives, hosted by Student Employability and Entrepreneurship Development (SEED), were designed to strengthen innovation, entrepreneurship and employability skills.

Central to the visit was the Emergence of Innovators Programme (EIO), held from 6–8 May under the theme *Innovating for Africa: Designing Afrocentric Solutions for a Changing Continent*. The programme challenged 82 students to think creatively, work collaboratively and develop solutions to real-world problems.

Designing solutions for Africa

Facilitated by experts from the GRIT Hub and Standard Bank, the programme explored topics ranging from entrepreneurial mindset development and design thinking to financial literacy, business viability, artificial intelligence and pitch development.

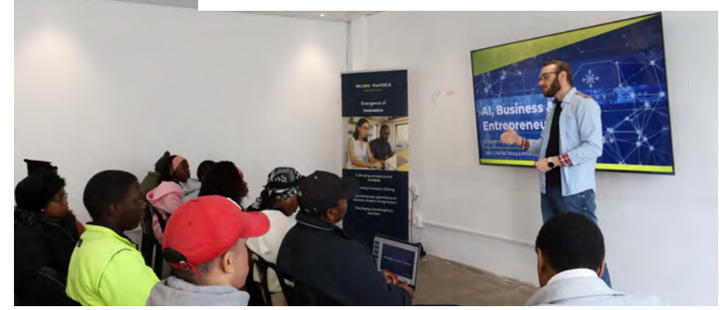
Students were encouraged to engage with innovation from an African perspective while developing the confidence and skills needed to transform ideas into opportunities.

Despite weather-related challenges, participation remained strong throughout, with students contributing to discussions, teamwork activities and innovation exercises.

Beyond entrepreneurship

The visit to George Campus also included a Women in Entrepreneurship Bootcamp, providing aspiring women entrepreneurs with opportunities to strengthen their entrepreneurial skills, build networks and explore new business opportunities.

Students also participated in a CV and Interview Preparation Workshop focused on professional branding, interview techniques and practical job application skills.



Preparing for the future

As the Student Employability and Entrepreneurship Development programme continues to expand across campuses, initiatives such as these are helping students build the confidence, knowledge and practical skills needed to create opportunities for themselves and others.

It started With a R350 SASSA Grant

Entrepreneur Phumeza "Ginger" Dolo has transformed a backyard idea into a growing natural products brand, with support from the Mandela University Africa Hub Accelerator Programme helping to take Isitiya Sam to new heights.

What began with a R350 SASSA grant and a handful of herbs has grown into an award-winning business producing teas, spices and wellness products.

Today, Isitiya Sam is earning recognition on provincial and national stages, proving that innovation can flourish even from the humblest beginnings.

The founder of ISthebe Kitchenette, trading as Isitiya Sam, turned a period of unemployment into a thriving venture rooted in traditional knowledge, natural ingredients and sustainable living.

Meaning "My Garden", the business emerged after Dolo discovered wild chamomile growing near Motherwell River and recognised the potential of natural products.

Inspired, she began planting herbs in her own garden and set out to build a business around them, steadily expanding the product range.

A turning point

While challenges such as limited workspace, equipment shortages and production costs remain, Dolo's determination to grow her business never wavered.

Joining the Accelerator Programme proved to be a turning point.

Through mentorship, training, networking opportunities and business exposure, she gained valuable skills and connections that helped strengthen and grow the enterprise.

Since then, Isitiya Sam has showcased its products at events including the Mandela University Fund Gala Dinner Exhibition and the Durban Business Fair, significantly expanding the brand's visibility.

"I started the business with only R350 from my SASSA grant, using the little I had to turn my idea into reality," she says.

Today, Isitiya Sam is expanding its footprint across the Eastern Cape, demonstrating how entrepreneurial ambition, combined with the right support and opportunities, can transform a simple idea into a successful enterprise.

Isitiya Sam's recent achievements:

- Standard Bank Expo – Second Place
- Young Producer Award
- Agripreneur of the Year 2026
- FNB Monetise Your Business Pitch Competition Winner

Recognition follows resilience

Dolo's entrepreneurial journey has attracted growing recognition on the competition circuit.

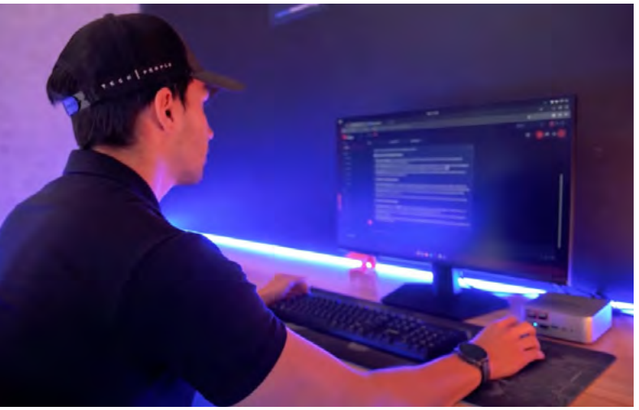
Among her achievements are second place at the Standard Bank Expo, the Young Producer Award at an agriculture exhibition, the Agripreneur of the Year 2026 Award, and first place in the FNB Monetise Your Business Pitch Competition.

These accolades reflect not only the quality of Isitiya Sam's products, but also the resilience, innovation and commitment behind the business.

WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

Startups Need More than Hustle

The World Economic Forum highlights the need for capital, relevant education and community support for successful entrepreneurship.



Samsung Partnership Powers Advanced AI Skills

Backed by a R3.6-million commitment from Samsung South Africa, the three-year Samsung Innovation Campus, launched on 1 April this year, is equipping postgraduate students with industry-ready coding, programming and AI skills.

At the launch of the Chancellor's Entrepreneurship Fund in February, Samsung South Africa Chief Executive Officer and President Simon Lee committed R3.6-million through MUAH to establish the Samsung Innovation Campus at Mandela University. The three-year partnership offers an annual short learning course that equips students with industry-ready coding, programming and AI skills.

The inaugural course currently includes 27 postgraduate Mandela University students selected from 90 applicants. "The first cohort will graduate in February 2027 and by the end of the three years we should have 90 graduates," says course coordinator Dr Jessica Thornton.

"The selected students must have an IT, coding and programming studies background. Their research fields can be wide-ranging – from cyber security and AI, to science students incorporating IT into their research.

"We also ensure gender equality, with 50% female and 50% male students selected, all of whom were assessed with the Samsung Innovation Campus pre-test on their readiness."

Inside the programme

It's an intense, nine-unit course – two hours every day, mostly online, combined with in-person workshops at the Teaching Laboratory at Mandela University's Science Centre on the Ocean Science Campus.

On Saturdays, students are assessed unit by unit. Samsung provides the three course facilitators with a wealth of materials and just one unit comprises over 200 slides.

"The first part of the course focuses on coding and programming, and we have a four-day milestone hackathon project in July," Dr Thornton explains.

"Over those days, they're given the equivalent of a client brief to develop a software programme using Python, algorithms, data processing and data visualisation.

"The second part of the course focuses on mastering the foundations of generative AI and the practical application of AI skills. The course also addresses AI ethics and responsibilities. Again, we will have a hackathon – this time they're tasked with solving simulated business problems using generative AI."

The facilitators are from academia and industry. Professor Nobert Jere is from the Department of Computational Science at the University of Fort Hare, while Siseko Dana and Jason McNamara are industry-recognised digital learning coaches and IT professionals based at the Science Centre's Future Integrated Talent Lab.

What problem am I solving?

Siseko Dano, facilitator

"The curriculum exposes students to technologies used in industry today, including coding, AI, data analytics and digital problem-solving. Employers are looking for people who can think critically, communicate effectively, work in teams and adapt to changing technologies. Beyond the classroom, we encourage students to identify challenges in their communities and workplaces and ask themselves: 'What problem am I solving?' and 'How can this solution create value for others?'."

Developing industry level skills

Kamva Twala is doing his Honours in IT, specialising in cybersecurity, through Mandela University's Faculty of Engineering, the Built Environment and Technology (EBET).

"It's a brilliant initiative where I'm developing industry-level skills. Learning Python has added to my knowledge of programming languages, including C-Sharp and Java. I'm particularly excited about the AI component because I want to create my own AI solutions. Our team won the Eastern Cape leg and finished second nationally in the 2026 MICT SETA National Skills Challenge Hackathon. We're now developing our app, ThethaNam ('Speak to Me'), into a business through the university-aligned incubator, Propella."

Burning hotter than ever

Mihle Vika is an IT master's student in the Faculty of EBET and a Digital Ubuntu intern. Digital Ubuntu is a partnership between MUAH and Google.org to assist students from all disciplines to build their cybersecurity and AI skills.

"It's difficult to put into words how amazing the course process has been. My passion for coding and programming is burning hotter than ever. I'm now confident enough in Python skills to solve real-world problems or digitalise existing manual solutions. The level of understanding I've gained so far will help me to handle any industry tasksindustry tasks thrown at me."

Using technology to create value

Jason McNamara, facilitator

"Students build a strong foundation in Python before progressing to areas such as data structures, algorithms and object-oriented programming. Python is widely used in AI, data science, automation and software development. Beyond technical skills, the curriculum develops critical thinking, communication, collaboration and digital confidence. We also integrate entrepreneurial thinking through coding challenges and project-based tasks that encourage students to solve real-world problems, think about users and develop solutions that create value."

Student Entrepreneurship Market 2026

From thrift fashion and baked goods to beauty products, perfumes and driving schools, the Student Entrepreneurship Market has become a vibrant showcase for student and township entrepreneurs – and a gateway into the support programmes offered by Mandela University Africa Hub.

Launched in March 2025, the market has quickly become one of the Hub's flagship events.

The latest market, held on 22 April 2026 at the Second Avenue Campus in Summerstrand, attracted 48 student and township entrepreneurs. Visitors experienced an impressive variety of enterprises, ranging from hair and beauty products, perfumes and cleaning products to baked goods, driving schools and thrift fashion businesses.

Beyond providing a space to sell products and services, the event celebrates innovation and encourages entrepreneurs to share their journeys with students from all faculties and the wider community.

"The market's primary purpose is to promote entrepreneurship on and off campus while raising awareness about the range of support programmes and opportunities available through the Hub," says MUAH public relations internlower case public relations intern Kamva Magobiane.

Connecting entrepreneurs with opportunities

Through engaging activities, including entrepreneurship quizzes, prize giveaways, business presentations and a thrift fashion show featuring student models, visitors learnt about the opportunities available through the Hub's business development and incubation programmes in a fun and interactive way.

1 MC Iman Mciteka guided visitors through the Student Market, highlighting the different vendors, their products and where people can find and support their businesses.

2 Entrepreneur Phumeza "Ginger" Dolo

3 Bunny Butch Lady, Vanessa Mbanze, showcased her unique bunny-shaped muffins filled with creamy custard. As a fresh addition to the market, her treats caught the attention of visitors.

4 Students with a passion for fashion stopped by the thrifting stall to explore second-hand clothing items.

Entrepreneurs and aspiring entrepreneurs attending the market completed client information forms that help the Hub understand their needs and stage of business development.

Those who do not yet have registered businesses are connected with Business Development Officers who provide support through a range of MSME development interventions. Entrepreneurs with registered ventures are directed to relevant Hub programmes designed to help them strengthen their businesses and scale their operations.

The market also encourages students and entrepreneurs to attend the Hub's weekly Thursday workshops, where industry experts, funders and business leaders share practical insights and guidance.

"We aim to host these markets three times a year. The next market will be held in July and, each time, we aim for them to be bigger and better," Kamva says.

BEYOND THE MARKET

Entrepreneurs who attend the market can:

- Access MUAH business development programmes
- Receive support from Business Development Officers
- Attend weekly workshops
- Connect with industry experts, funders and business leaders
- Develop skills to grow and scale their businesses
- Become part of the Hub's entrepreneurship ecosystem

2025/26

Q2 IMPACT REPORT

A Progress Analysis Report providing a comprehensive overview of performance in 2025 and 2026.

Mandela University Africa Hub Performance Overview

Students/ Youth Trained
2 843

Jobs Created
154

Jobs Sustained
253

Events Hosted
104

Attendees
5 198

5 Academic Articles Published

Social Media Reach
1.59 Million

FUNDING

ZAR

Funding Received	SEED Fund Dispersed	SMMEs Turnover Generated
R32 010 000+	R5 450 000+	R29 447 000+

Workshops Held	90
SMMEs with >5% Turnover	55
Entrepreneurs Incubated	109
Clients Supported	183

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Change the World